

Who was Responsible for the Holocaust?

1. Sourcework

Task 1

Read the sources and answer these questions.

1. Does Buller (Source 1) think that the German people were 'Hitler's willing executioners'?
2. Is it fair to describe Stangl (Source 2) as a heartless animal?
3. Do you think that Gnewuch (Source 3) should be excused for his actions because he was just a soldier with a duty to follow his orders?
4. What lessons does Niemoller's poem (Source 4) teach us?
5. Overall, do these sources suggest that the German people were evil, cowards, neither or both?

Source 1: Extract from an interview with E.A. Buller, a German civilian, 1945:

"Our great mistake lay in our failure to see right at the beginning when the Party decided to persecute the Jews, that once persecution became part of its gospel, no one could say where it would stop. We were not quick enough to organize against the movement while it was still possible ... And while we were so slow, and I will add so tired after the last war and all the bad years that ... followed, the Nazis gained such control over our lives that we woke up to find ourselves in chains."

Source 2: Extract from an interview with Franz Stangl, commandant of Treblinka, 1971:

Q. "Did you think the Jews were human beings?"

A. "Cargo. They were cargo."

Q. "When did you begin to think of them as cargo?"

A. "I think it started the day I saw the death camp ... I remember standing there, next to the pits full of blue-black corpses. It had nothing to do with humanity – it couldn't have ... Wirth said, 'What shall we do with this garbage?' I think that started me thinking of them as cargo."

Source 3: An interview with Erich Gnewuch, a soldier in Nazi-occupied USSR, 1993

"On orders from my department, I too drove a gas-van from Berlin to Minsk. These vans had been constructed with a lockable cargo compartment, like a moving van... There were about a thousand Jews in each convoy... Some of the Jews were shot. I myself never shot a single Jew; I only gassed them... I gassed about 150 to 180 people".

Source 4: A poem by Martin Niemoller (1892-1984), a German Pastor

"First they came for the Communists but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out;

Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists but I was not one of them, so I did not speak out;

Then they came for the Jews but I was not Jewish so I did not speak out.

And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me."

2. Analysis

Task 2

- Read through the following four interpretations about who was responsible for the Holocaust.
- Which of these four points of view do you find the most convincing?
- Then, provide an interpretation which you think all four groups would be prepared to accept as a fair compromise.

<p>Hitler (the "Intentionalist" view)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Intentionalist" historians say that Hitler always intended to carry out the Holocaust. ▪ "The mass murder of Jews was the consummation of Hitler's fundamental beliefs and ideological convictions...For Hitler's ideas about the Jews were the starting place for the elaboration of a monstrous racial ideology that would justify mass murder" (Lucy Dawidowitz). 	<p>The State (the "Structuralist" view)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Structuralist" historians say that the Holocaust was an accidental result of a policy which ran out of control. ▪ Hitler encouraged "Survival of the Fittest" within the government so that officials competed with each other to appear the most efficient and ruthless. ▪ So, Kristallnacht was masterminded by Goebbels to win Hitler's favour; the Holocaust was the responsibility of over-zealous party officials such as Himmler and Eichmann.
<p>The War</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some historians argue without the war the Holocaust would not have happened. (a) The war disrupted plans for mass Jewish emigration, and meant Germany gained control of many more Jews when they wanted less. (b) The war brutalized people (e.g. a shortage of hospital beds for war wounded that the T4 Euthanasia program was developed). 	<p>The German People</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daniel Goldhagen, in his book "Hitler's Willing Executioners" claims at least 100,000 ordinary Germans were involved in the Holocaust. ▪ "Goldhagen argues that Germans killed Jews in their millions because they enjoyed doing it, and they enjoyed doing it because their minds and emotions were eaten up by a murderous, all-consuming hatred of Jews that had been pervasive in the German political culture for decades..." (Richard Evans)